

Building a Purpose Economy in Burnaby: How Social Purpose Business Can Strengthen Communities and Support Economic Resilience

Prepared for a delegation to the Burnaby Social Planning Committee

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Recommendations

1. **That the Social Planning Committee recognize social purpose business as a contributor to Burnaby's social, economic, and environmental objectives;**
2. **That the Social Planning Committee recommend that Council direct staff to review opportunities to incorporate social purpose business into the City's Social Sustainability Strategy; and**
3. **That the Social Planning Committee recommend that Council direct staff to review opportunities to incorporate the Social Purpose Recommendations listed in the table below into the City's Economic Development Strategy.**

Introduction

Burnaby has many of the ingredients needed to support a thriving purpose economy: a diverse business base, strong community organizations, educational institutions, entrepreneurial talent, and a long tradition of civic leadership. By encouraging businesses to adopt and embed a social purpose, Burnaby can strengthen local economic resilience, support community well-being, and create new opportunities for innovation, investment, and talent attraction.

Social purpose businesses contribute to many of the outcomes municipalities seek to achieve through social planning. They create meaningful employment, strengthen community connections, foster inclusion and belonging, support environmental stewardship, build trust, and encourage collaboration to address local challenges. By helping businesses align their success with the well-being of people and communities, social purpose can be an important contributor to a healthy, resilient, and inclusive city.

A social purpose is a company's reason for being in the world beyond profit. It defines the positive contribution a business seeks to make to society and helps guide strategy, decision-making, innovation, employee engagement, customer relationships, and long-term value creation. Increasingly, businesses are recognizing that social purpose can strengthen competitiveness, build trust, attract talent, foster innovation, and contribute to more resilient local economies.

Canada is witnessing the early stages of a purpose economy—an economy in which businesses, governments, investors, educational institutions, and civil society organizations work together to create shared prosperity while addressing societal and environmental challenges. Municipal governments can play an important role in creating the conditions that enable social purpose businesses to flourish.

The following recommendations are offered for consideration by the City of Burnaby as practical ways to encourage, support, and showcase social purpose business leadership.

Together, these actions could strengthen Burnaby's economy, enhance community well-being, and help position the City as a leader in advancing the purpose economy in Canada.

Canadian Businesses Are Embracing Social Purpose

[Recent research](#) suggests that social purpose is becoming an increasingly important business practice across Canada.

- Nearly three in ten Canadian SMEs (29%) report having an explicit or implicit social purpose, with an additional 9% planning to develop one within the next five years.
- British Columbia leads the country, with 36% of SMEs reporting an explicit or implicit social purpose.
- Businesses cite customer trust, employee attraction and retention, competitive differentiation, and social impact among the key reasons for adopting a social purpose.
- The trend extends beyond small businesses. [Research conducted by the Canadian Purpose Economy Project](#) found that 40% of Canada's largest publicly traded companies in the TSX 60 have adopted a social purpose.

These findings suggest that social purpose is becoming an increasingly mainstream business practice and that Burnaby has an opportunity to support local businesses in adopting and embedding purpose as a source of resilience, innovation, competitiveness, and community value.

Burnaby's Opportunity to Lead

Burnaby has already demonstrated leadership in advancing social purpose business. In 2021, City Council approved a partnership between the City of Burnaby, the Burnaby Board of Trade, and the former United Way BC Social Purpose Institute to promote social purpose business in Burnaby and support local businesses in understanding and adopting social purpose business practices. The partnership reflected a shared vision of Burnaby as a centre for social purpose business leadership and innovation.

The City has also recognized the importance of social purpose business through its proclamations of Purpose in Business Week from 2020 - 2023. Mayor Mike Hurley has also publicly recognized the importance of social purpose business to the City's future. Speaking at the national [Propelling Purpose Summit](#) in 2021, he noted that "cities that are home to social purpose businesses are more likely to thrive given the contributions these businesses make to their local communities. We also believe that social purpose businesses are more likely to thrive in the future, so the more social purpose businesses we have in our community, the stronger and more resilient our local economy will be."

Today, social purpose is becoming an increasingly mainstream business practice. Burnaby has an opportunity to build on its earlier leadership and position itself as a leading municipality in the emerging purpose economy.

The Township of Langley's [Social Sustainability Strategy](#) recognizes social purpose business as a contributor to community well-being and social sustainability, providing a municipal precedent for Burnaby to incorporate social purpose business into its own Social Sustainability Strategy.

"Support initiatives that build the capacity of public, private, and non-profit organizations to address community issues and innovate in a more collaborative way, such as: piloting tactics to strengthen local business engagement in social sustainability, such as promoting social purpose business as an emerging business trend."

- *Township of Langley Social Sustainability Strategy*

Burnaby benefits from a strong concentration of social purpose business leaders, practitioners, and organizations that are helping to advance this work locally, nationally, and internationally. Their experience and leadership provide the City with a unique opportunity to draw on local expertise as it explores ways to strengthen economic prosperity, community well-being, and environmental sustainability.

Burnaby is home to many businesses that demonstrate the connection between business success and community benefit. Hemlock Printers' purpose is "to create connections, build community, and inspire actions that safeguard the health of the world's forests". This purpose informs how the company engages employees, serves customers, supports community initiatives, and contributes to environmental stewardship. Such examples illustrate how social purpose business can create positive impacts that extend beyond economic activity alone.

The following recommendations are drawn from [Canadian policy work](#) that identified 52 actions local governments can take to accelerate the adoption of social purpose business and support the growth of a purpose economy.

They were initially selected for their relevance to the mandate of the Mayor's Task Force on Burnaby Economic Growth and Resilience and the City's Economic Development Strategy.

Recommendations for the City of Burnaby

The following planning and policy measures are offered for consideration by the City of Burnaby as part of its efforts to advance economic prosperity and community well-being. For reference and more details, please see [Social Purpose Business Public Policy Options](#), pages 22 – 25.

They were initially selected for their relevance to the Mayor's Task Force on Burnaby Economic Growth and Resilience and the City's Economic Development Strategy. They are also relevant to the City's Social Sustainability Strategy because they support stronger communities, meaningful employment, social inclusion, and collaboration on local challenges.

Priority Municipal Actions to Support a Purpose Economy in Burnaby

Note: Recommendation numbers correspond to the numbering used in the Social Purpose Business Public Policy Options paper. The recommendations shown are a selected subset of the municipal policy actions identified in that report and have been reorganized for presentation purposes.

Category	Policy Action	Recommendation	Identifies Economic Challenges & Opportunities	Supports Sustainable Growth	Aligns with Burnaby's Long-Term Planning Frameworks
Community-Facing Policy Actions	3.1	Municipal Social Purpose Declaration	✓	✓	✓
	3.6	Municipal Plans and Strategies	✓	✓	✓
	3.8	Cluster Development	✓	✓	✓
	3.9	Sector and Industry Association Engagement	✓	✓	✓
	3.14	Business and Ecosystem Collaboration	✓	✓	✓
Internal Corporate Actions	3.2	Public Sector Social Purpose Procurement		✓	✓
	3.11	Regulatory Innovation	✓	✓	✓
	3.17	Land and Building Assets for Incubation and Prototyping	✓	✓	✓
Collaboration with Others	3.15	Local / Regional Government Collaboration	✓	✓	✓
	3.16	Post-Secondary Collaboration	✓	✓	✓

Category	Policy Action	Recommendation	Identifies Economic Challenges & Opportunities	Supports Sustainable Growth	Aligns with Burnaby's Long-Term Planning Frameworks
	3.10	Advocacy to Senior Governments	✓	✓	

Why Social Purpose Matters for Social Planning

- Supports meaningful and inclusive employment opportunities.
- Strengthens connections between businesses and communities.
- Encourages businesses to contribute to local priorities and community well-being.
- Builds trust, social capital, and community resilience.
- Supports collaboration among businesses, governments, educational institutions, and community organizations to address social and environmental challenges.

Social purpose business can also contribute to inclusive economic development and economic reconciliation. Purpose-led businesses can support Indigenous entrepreneurship, Indigenous procurement, supplier diversity, and partnerships with Indigenous communities. As Burnaby continues to advance reconciliation and strengthen relationships with Host Nations, social purpose businesses can play an important role in contributing to shared prosperity and community well-being.

Conclusion

Burnaby has an opportunity to build on its history of leadership in social purpose business and position itself as a municipality where businesses, community organizations, educational institutions, and governments work together to create shared prosperity and community well-being.

As social purpose becomes an increasingly mainstream business practice, purpose-led businesses can contribute not only to economic growth, but also to stronger communities, greater resilience, environmental stewardship, and improved quality of life for residents.

About the Canadian Purpose Economy Project

The Canadian Purpose Economy Project exists to accelerate the transition to the purpose economy. It engages national ecosystem actors to create an enabling environment for social purpose businesses to start, transition, thrive and grow. We are grateful to Coast Capital, our Founding Purpose Champion, for their support. The Canadian Purpose Economy Project is a program of Canadian Business for Social Responsibility Education Foundation. Subscribe for updates at: <http://www.purposeeconomy.ca> and sign our Call to Purpose to help advance social purpose in business.